

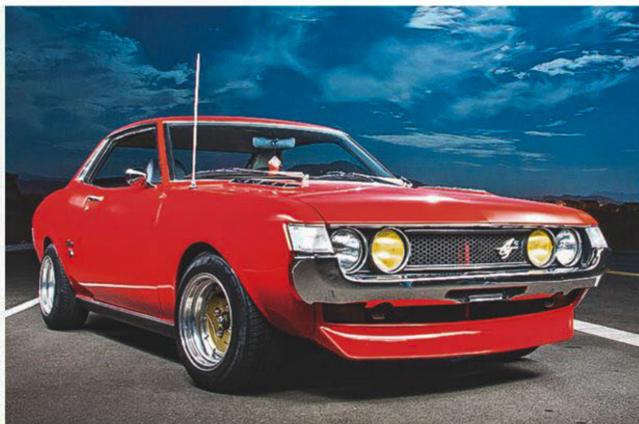
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# SHIFT

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## THE 70'S WAS THE GREATEST DECADE FOR THE WORLD OF AUTOMOBILES



*The 1970's was a time of turbulence – social upheaval, economic downturns, proxy wars and the height of a tug of war between world superpowers meant this particular decade saw the birth of new nations, entrenching of anti-establishment ideologies and immense technological progress. If the automobile is a reflection of the times, it's clear that many of the things we take for granted in cars today took shape in the forge of the 70's. Innovation was needed – otherwise the automobile would've been written off, a useless product of excess in a world that wasn't interested in anything but bare-minimum survival. 2017 is going to be yet another year of reckoning for the automobile for slightly different reasons, and in a bid to understand the situation, we take a look at the decade that truly shaped the modern automobile.*

On the eve of my 12th birthday, my mom begrudgingly bought me a copy of Led Zeppelin IV, on the condition that she never had to hear the greatest rock-n-roll band in the world perform their magic. I hadn't heard of Led Zeppelin before – I have the guy peddling counterfeit music CDs over the counter in a tiny shop on Dhanmondi Road 6 to thank for my anachronistic obsession with the 70's. I discovered Bowie, Pink Floyd, Queen, Hendrix and The Rolling Stones at the same time that my other obsession with cars was growing, mostly thanks to frequent trips to the crumbling bookshelves of my eldest cousin, who only had 30 year old copies of Car, Autocar and Road & Track magazines. For a kid growing up in the early 2000's, when pretty much the only available reading or listening material on topics I was interested in came from three decades prior, I went with it. Even though it was 2004, I was essentially living in the 70's.

Which is why you should consider this a fair warning – I have not lived through the 70's, so the experience of living it is obviously wildly different from the daydreaming and regretful feeling of being stuck "in the wrong era", and the conclusion that the 1970's was a great time for living in is an extremely flawed one at best. However, there's merit to the fact that the 70's produced, through the galvanizing forces of social change, economic imbalance and political hubbubbery, some of the greatest cars ever known to man.

The historical significance of the decade stems from three economic and geo-political factors – Britain's decision to join the Common Market of the European Economic Community, OPEC's decision to choke the supply of oil to the Western world, and Japan's economic boom.

In 1973, under the leadership of pro-Europe Prime Minister Edward Heath, Britain joined the Common Market, an economic union between the largest economies of Europe, in a bid to bolster domestic growth and nurture productive competition. The basic idea was to take British brands and drop them in a competitive market where they'd have to adapt and take on the Germans,

French and Italians. When it came to cars, the British were sorely outmatched – British Leyland, a behemoth of a company with the maneuverability of a planet, eventually broke up and sold off the many brands under its umbrella. Ford ended up with control of Jaguar-Land Rover, Morris and Austin ceased to exist, the only remnant being the name "Mini", which was sold off to the Germans, the very people British Leyland was supposed to beat. British Leyland became MG Rover, which is currently undergoing a revival at the hands of the Chinese.

You might be wondering how any of this was good for the auto industry as I've boldly claimed. In fact, it was – it weeded out the



The 70's was characterised by loud colours and bold statements. The Austin Mini, a product of the 60's, reached the height of popularity in the 70's, prominent artists like Andy Warhol used BMWs as canvases, the Vespa grew into an anti-establishment icon much like the VW Beetle.

manufacturers which just didn't have what it takes to find a place in the hierarchy. All of this sounds insensitive – British Leyland Motor Corporation (BLMC) employed hundreds of thousands of workers and the tumultuous years of being non-competitive in the Common Market no doubt had its toll on lives and families across Britain. However, that's quite debatable since the auto workers union was quite strong and staged frequent strikes whenever things didn't go their way; ironic because overbearing worker unions was one of the reasons why BLMC went defunct.

On the other side of the Atlantic, US automakers were under pressure: Detroit was collapsing and no one knew how to save it.

The oil embargo pushed onto the US by oil producing nations of the Middle East meant Dodge, Chevrolet and Ford just couldn't get away with making highly inefficient 6000cc V8 engines with very little power anymore. They had to make smaller cars, find ways to make them efficient, offer models that focused on fuel economy and sacrificed pseudo-luxury items in favour of basic but quality products that appealed to the masses. Weirdly enough, despite being the bastions of consumer pleasers the US giants claimed they were, they just couldn't wrap their heads around the fact that the rules had changed and they'd been caught with their pants around their collective knees. The era of the



muscle car was gone, and the world woke up to a blindingly obvious fact: Americans were completely inept at making cars that served an actual purpose, instead of relying on show-boating and over the top claims of craftsmanship. How does a nation that sent men to the moon mess up a box rolling on four wheels?

The only American manufacturer to trudge on year after year with barely any trouble was Ford, but only because their European division had the talent to take on the world and win, with cars like the Cortina, Escort and Capri.

It swooped the Japanese on a tidal wave of efficiency, purposefulness, reliability and

value for money. Things were going well back at home – the Japanese model of saving until the banks ran out of vault space meant the Japs were largely unaffected by the global economic crises. When the world cried out for small, efficient motoring at low cost, the Japanese answered the call – they made nothing but. Toyota, Honda and Datsun moved in, set up shop in America, and proceeded to dominate the industry for five decades straight with economy cars like the Honda Civic and Toyota Corolla, as well as sports cars like the Datsun 240Z. They had minor successes in Europe as well, mainly thanks to the British ineptitude at making cars that had anything more than character.



The 70's was brilliant for the Germans and the French, though. When faced with the task of tooling up and producing cars for a competitive market, the Germans chose not to pack up shop and leave while bemoaning lack of government protectionist support or the uphill task of dealing with disgruntled workers. The Germans, in typical German fashion, took the task at hand and hammered away at it till a solution turned up.

Porsche had a way of beating the fuel crisis with a contraption that would become synonymous with power and speed in later decades – the turbocharger. The 911 Turbo 3.0 launched the world into a turbo frenzy, and by the close of the 70's, almost every ambi-

tious manufacturer from Oldsmobile to BMW had a turbocharged car in their lineup. Nowadays, the turbocharger is as much a necessity as it is capable of invoking excitement in motoring enthusiasts – Mercedes Benz, Volkswagen and BMW all employ turbochargers mated to small displacement engine blocks to create highly efficient engines that save fuel while providing plenty of thrills.

In motorsport, Formula 1 was allowed to go crazy with the rulebook, producing some of the most outrageous machines ever seen, from the six-wheeled to the giant fan at the back kind. Le Mans was seeing speed records broken every day. The men behind the wheels were pushing the boundaries, challenging themselves and others in a fiery contest that thrilled and stunned viewers from that generation and beyond. Ideas like Colin Chapman's monocoque chassis filtered down from the F1 grid to streets, making cars safer and faster. Rally cars like the Lancia Stratos defied physics and injected much needed life into the automobile at a time when the very idea of the motor car was considered frivolous, excessive.

In every avenue, the motoring industry well and truly defined itself under pressure. It was an honest decade, a public confession of the abilities, the potential, the immense talent (or lack thereof) harboured by giant corporations that came to light.

Donald Trump is now taking charge at the Oval Office and threatening to lobotomise any manufacturer daring to step outside of the US. Britain is preparing to leave the European Union and forego the benefits that the membership provides to much improved, globalised British brands such as Jaguar, Land Rover and Mini. The South Koreans threaten to take over and dominate like the Japanese did. The auto industry might have completely changed face since the heady days of punk rock, turbo mania and funky paint, but we seem to have come full circle in 2017. The litmus test is back, and great things await those who survive it.

SHAHER REAZ

## It thinks there's a permanent fuel crisis.



F1 was interesting in the 70's thanks to Tyrrell's crazy 6-wheeler. At the same time, efficiency was sold to the public for the road.



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